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Mary E. Hess
Luther Seminary, mhess@luthersem.edu

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Life on Screen and Other Musings on Faith, Food, and Media

MARY HESS

Through more than a decade of research, we have learned that religious identity is formed and shaped primarily by our most intimate relationships. Our daily practices fundamentally shape our faith. Growing up within a community that regularly shares table prayers, for instance, shapes a sense of God as a transcendent being worthy of gratitude, a being whose voice can be heard through community.

The research into the elements that sustain faith in youth by Wesley Black, Roland Martinson, and John Roberto has identified several faith factors that are embedded in practice.[1] Historical and theological research confirms these insights. The *Practicing Our Faith Project*, for instance, has identified twelve practices of faith—practices that are neither creedal nor liturgical in character—that fundamentally shape Christian knowing.[2]

We know this from the Bible as well. I regularly turn to texts that remind me that I am not the primary teacher in any given setting; we are always bound to and embraced by God. It is God who makes learning happen (see, for example, Deut 6:4–10; Jer 31:33–34; Matt 6:9–13/Luke 11:2–4; Luke 24:13–35; 1 Cor 12:13;

[1]See *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry,* by Wesley Black, Roland Martinson and John Roberto, at http://www.exemplarym.com/ (accessed May 10, 2012).

[2]More information on this project is available at http://www.practicingourfaith.org/what-are-christian-practices (accessed May 10, 2012).

Media and food have this in common: a healthy diet of either one nourishes us, while an unhealthy diet causes problems. Just as we eat together in families, we should find ways to engage media together as well.

Rom12:4; Acts 2:42). These texts remind us that our practices matter, not in an eschatological or salvific way, but in a pragmatic and functional one.

Practice matters. We know this descriptively; we know it theologically and biblically. What might this tell us about the ways in which we teach and learn about God and from God in a world that is increasingly dominated by screens that display digital media? Practice matters here as well. How might we reshape our practices with the screens that are so much a part of our lives—the smartphones, the computers, the video games, the television sets? How might we reshape our practices with these media so that we can enjoy the ways in which we can learn and grow with these media but also challenge the more problematic or even destructive elements of "life lived with a screen"?

Food and Media

As we think about these things, we might be helped by realizing that our practices with food and our practices with screens have much in common. Consider this: we all require food to survive. Yet we are embedded in cultural contexts that offer us unhealthy choices (in terms of what we eat, how much of it, and how often). There is little—if any—social consensus about what healthy food practices might entail. And the artful practices of preparing and eating food are seriously stressed, if not extinct. When was the last time you baked bread? Or made jams or jelly? Or canned vegetables for the winter? Now think about these same factors in relation to digital media. First, digital media are primarily media of communication. The reason cell phones are so ubiquitous, even given the expense of some of them, is that they help us feel connected and maintain relationships. The same is true about computers. Even television is a form of communication—not simply because it can present us with news or other information, but because it offers so much of the basic "stuff" around which we communicate (the sports games, the drama shows, the comedies, and so on).

Media is about communication and, like food, we require communication to survive. Yet we are embedded in cultural contexts that offer us a lot of unhealthy choices (both in terms of *what* we choose to communicate in media, and *how* we use media to communicate). And there is no social consensus about what healthy communication practice might be. Is it okay to bring a cell phone to church? What can be said via e-mail and what needs to be said in person? Who is part of your "friend network"—indeed, what is the definition of "friend"? So what are we to do? We know that we need to develop healthy practices with food. It's not simply *what* we eat that matters, but *how* we eat it. We know that helping children learn to prepare food can vastly expand the types of food that they are willing to eat. Research suggests that children in families who eat a certain number of meals together every week are less vulnerable to problematic behaviors than children in families who rarely, if ever, eat together. Helping children grow and prepare food and helping families find ways to eat family meals together are two very strong ac-

tions that faith communities can take to support families. Many are already doing so, with Wednesday evening family faith formation potluck gatherings and Sunday afternoon cooking clubs.[3] We are beginning to discover similar patterns with screens. What we watch matters, and *how* we watch it matters.

CONSIDER *DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES*

For the sake of this inquiry, think for a moment about the wildly popular television show *Desperate Housewives*. This network drama is well into its eighth season in 2012 (though this will apparently be its last). The main characters of the show—four suburban housewives named Susan, Gabrielle, Lynette, and Bree—draw us into compelling stories of family life. The dilemmas they face, the pleasures they encounter, and the challenges with children, spouses, health, and so on are, in most cases, the stuff of daily life. Over eight years we have laughed and cried with them as they battled alcoholism, cancer, children's injuries, infidelity, domestic violence, and endured their neighborhood's destruction by a tornado. We have even attended church with them.

Like the telenovelas of the Spanish-speaking world, this drama creates multiple opportunities for people to "feel through" and thereby "think through" a variety of dilemmas and challenges. We are drawn into the world of Wisteria Lane because we identify in certain ways with these characters. The guilty pleasure of watching such a show is that we can exercise various parts of our imaginations, feeling certain things without ever actually engaging in the harmful actions of these screen characters. Unlike the telenovelas, however, some of which have been deliberately written to offer commentary on pressing social problems and support for engaging them, the implicit curriculum of *Desperate Housewives* is rather more problematic. Race and class are represented in this show in ways that far more often support systemic racism than contest it. Yes, there are characters who are not white, but often these characters find themselves wrapped up in story lines that portray their problems as deviant, even criminal.

For the most part, African-American, Asian, and Latino characters on *Desperate Housewives* appear in minor supporting roles that emphasize their utility as workers; they are not seen as high-status professional colleagues, let alone supervisors or owners of businesses. While one of the main housewives, Gabrielle, and her husband are of Mexican descent, he is portrayed first as an embezzler, and later as a murderer. Although in each seasonal story arc Gaby's husband is offered some way to redeem himself or to justify his actions, his ongoing representation is negative.

Similar observations could be made about the ways in which earned income, inherited wealth, business ownership, and other markers of socioeconomic status emerge in the show's various story lines. You can watch years of this show (which is available via Netflix and other streaming mechanisms) and only rarely encounter a

[3]There are even churches that have invested in large outdoor brick ovens; some rent these ovens out to various gatherings when they are not otherwise in use.

character who needs to worry about money. As the economic recession hit in our "real" world, the show finally began to have a main character struggle with finances. Even as Susan fell into economic ruin that included a stint as a porn star, however, the consequences of her fall were nowhere as devastating as such consequences are in the worlds that most of us inhabit.

Still, even this critique of the show—that it perpetuates systemic racism, classism, and sexism—might simply be further evidence of the ongoing implicit curricula of commercial television; but it is the null curricula of that content that we need to consider.

> ***The null curriculum is what we learn through not being taught, what we learn through silence. The null curriculum of* Desperate Housewives *is the most worrisome.***

If an explicit curriculum is what we intend to teach, and an implicit curriculum is what we learn incidentally, the null curriculum is what we learn through not being taught, what we learn through silence, through taboo, through the careful lack of representation of specific elements of our environment and our knowing. The null curriculum of *Desperate Housewives* is the most worrisome. In eight years, for instance, when the neighborhood comes together in some form of collective action, the result is a violent riot. Whether the housewives are worried about a sexual predator or seeking to prevent a halfway house from being built, their collective efforts lead to destruction.[4] The only politicians who make an appearance are crooked, deceptive, manipulative, and conniving. The only government officials shown are the police, and the schools we see portrayed are, for the most part, not public but private.

The null curriculum here is that collective agency is not a good thing, and that there is no such thing as "a common good." Indeed, the only kind of real "agency" presented—that is, the only way in which these characters seem to make a difference in their world—is through individual action, primarily that of consumption.

"Church" does appear, primarily in the lives of Bree (portrayed as a gun-toting, Bible-wielding, conservative evangelical) and Gaby and her husband (portrayed as cradle Catholics with little need for the church). But there are no representations of real spirituality. To the extent that worship is shown, it is merely an incidental set decoration: a place within which the characters happen to be while they work through their own problems, not a place in which a community offers praise and prayer to God. God does not act in the world of this show, and God's chief representatives (the evangelical pastor and the Catholic priest) are ineffective white men who merely help the plot along when the main characters bump into problems.

[4]And, it might be noted, the only reason anyone was attempting to build such a residence on Wisteria Lane had to do with an evil villain's attempts to exact revenge on the neighborhood.

Even prayer is never represented as anything other than a frantic plea to the beyond or maybe a magical invocation.

Yet, even with all of the ways in which the content of this show is problematic—even with all of the ways in which we, as members of Christian communities who witness to a God of creation and promise, might want to step away from the show—even with these challenges, there is something going on with *Desperate Housewives* that is worthy of our attention. This show (and its eight years of ratings success) carries the message that there is something worthwhile to be found in friendship across various divides, there is something important to be found in caring for and about each other no matter the obstacles. This show offers hope found in the persistence with which people care for each other through life's challenges.

How might communities of faith invite people into deeper learning with a show such as this? Once again, our comparison with food might be helpful. As I have noted, food is something we all require to survive, and so, too, is communication. To think about how to manage our "screen" time, we need to think about what we know about healthy food practices. We cannot refrain from eating, and neither will we succeed in urging people not to watch such television shows (as previous eras of Christian attention to screens have attempted to do). We need instead to invite each other into deeper engagement with our faith through these shows. There is much to be learned by discussing Lynette's brush with cancer, for instance, and wondering aloud about her relationship with her family in the midst of that struggle. While God's actions are not in any way directly represented in the show, in what ways might we, as viewers, glimpse God's grace? What might members of our congregations bring to such a discussion? My point is not that we should all watch *Desperate Housewives*; it is rather that we should be aware of what we are already watching—on whatever screens we are using—and find ways to reshape our knowing and our practices around those screens.

Engaging Media Together

Recent research has shown that children of families who eat regular meals together tend to be less at risk for problematic behaviors.[5] Part of what underlies that finding is the recognition that families socialize their children into a variety of practices that have a major influence on children's lives. The research cited at the beginning of this essay shows that the ways in which children engage their faith at home has much more impact on their long-term religious faith than the extent to which they are involved in Sunday morning church activities.

Supporting families in engaging media *together*, rather than in isolation, is a crucial factor in supporting healthy screen time. What could this look like? How many "screens" (televisions, computer screens, video game controllers, etc.) does a family own, for instance, compared to how many members it has? If you are in a

[5]A good overview of this research is available at http://nutrition.wsu.edu/ebet/background.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

family of four, and own one television set, you are likely to have far more interaction around what to watch and when to watch it, than you do if you are a family with six television sets and four members. Arguing over which show to watch might not be as pleasant as everyone watching whatever they want to watch by themselves, but it provides an important opportunity to struggle as a family over what values will guide your screen choices. What kinds of choices, what kinds of rules are helpful here? There are several that are worth considering, including: What kind of news diet should a family have? How much screen time is appropriate? Is screen time isolated or shared?[6]

Learning to Create

Perhaps the single most effective intervention involves helping people learn how to *create* in media. Helping children learn how to create their own web pages, for instance, helps them to gain a healthy critical stance towards all web pages. Once they discover how easy it is to put something "on the screen" of the web, they inevitably start to wonder how authoritative other pages are. Much like my son, who was not interested in eating salsa until he grew tomatoes with his kindergarten class, harvested them, and made salsa himself, children who grow up learning how to create in media have a much easier time being critically involved with media.

We must always keep in mind the null curricula of dominant screen culture. Who has agency in these spaces? Is it only individuals? Where is God in the midst of our communication?

There are many ways in which communities of faith have already begun to do this, although they may not recognize it.[7] Think of mission trips, where youth come back with hundreds of pictures and turn them into musical slide shows that they share with the community through YouTube. Doing a project such as this not only helps youth to integrate and reflect upon their experience on the mission trip, it also helps them learn to share their faith beyond their immediate context. The same can be said of engagement with social media. It's far better to help youth—and their parents, for that matter!—learn to navigate social networks like Facebook and Google+ with the support and energy of a multigenerational faith community than for them to have to teach themselves how to do so in isolation from that community.

Yet we must always keep in mind the null curricula of dominant screen culture. Who has agency in these spaces? Is it only individuals? Here is another place where the analogy of food is useful. Where is God in the midst of our food prac-

[6]For examples of a "news diet" as well as links to a variety of such websites, see http://www2.luthersem.edu/mhess/web/faithfulchildren.html (accessed May 10, 2012).

[7]For more on digital storytelling as a form of faith formation, see http://www.storyingfaith.org/ (accessed May 10, 2012).

tices? We are learning to pay attention to where our food comes from, and the hands that plant and harvest it, the hands that prepare it, the hands—our hands! —joined together in prayer and thanksgiving for the bounty in front of us. We need to remember this on our screens as well. Where is God in the midst of our communication? We have to move from unacknowledged learning to intentional learning. We have to move from accepting our screen practices as "given" in our environment to a place where we actively engage them and give thanks for our God who continues to reveal God's own self even in the midst of our screens.

Healthy Diet

Every time you wonder about a form of media or worry about a film, a television show, or some other piece of popular culture with which you or your community are engaging, return to this analogy and use it to think through your concerns. Are you worried about the content of a film? Think about bad food. You can eat a hot dog once in a while without damaging your health, but eating spoiled or rotten food will cause your body to reject it violently. Is your concern about a film of the "guilty pleasure" type (Twinkies) or of the "spoiled and full of E. coli" type (bad hamburger)? Is the concern about the sheer amount of such "junk"? How might you put healthy alternatives in front of your faith community?

Are you concerned about the ways in which kids are communicating via text message and not in person? Think about how you might invite them into other artful practices of communication, but don't demand that they give up their favorite foods. Just as you would not demand that a child give up their favorite cereal to eat twelve-grain porridge every day, don't ask them to give up their text messages altogether. At the same time, invite them to use text messages to create something, to use them to pray with and for each other, for instance, or to use Facebook to gather glimpses of God's grace in their lives. Twelve-grain porridge tastes awfully good when you've been on a long, cold, early morning hike and are returning to a campsite for breakfast. So, too, can prayers shared via CaringBridge uplift and support people who are struggling to stay in touch with their community while fighting battles with poor health.

For better or worse, we are a community that increasingly lives "through our screens." Helping each other to retrieve and in some cases invent artful practices of preparing and engaging such screens may truly help us to recognize Christ, even as we journey on our own daily road to Emmaus.

MARY HESS is associate professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her current research seeks to understand the ways in which religious educators might constructively meet the challenges posed by media culture.